

United States Senate

WASHINGTON, DC 20510

August 31, 2022

The Honorable Susan Rice
Director
Domestic Policy Council
The White House
1600 Pennsylvania Ave, N.W.
Washington, D.C. 20500

Dear Ambassador Rice:

Thank you for coordinating the White House Conference on Hunger, Nutrition, and Health, the largest whole-of-government initiative to improve our food system in more than 50 years. We should set as our goal to end hunger and ensure that every child reach the age of 18 at a healthy weight. I was thrilled to work with my colleagues on bipartisan legislation (S.3064/H.R.5724) to help establish this Conference.

The first White House Conference in 1969 was transformative, and I believe that the upcoming conference can be equally impactful. I urge you to include in the Conference report under development the following actions that have the potential to dramatically improve nutrition and reduce hunger and diet related diseases in our country.

Integrate Food as Medicine into federal healthcare: programs such as medically tailored meals and produce prescriptions should become covered benefits by Medicare, Medicaid and the Veterans Administration in order to prevent and manage chronic disease. Our healthcare system largely ignores nutrition as a targeted opportunity for improving health and lowering healthcare spending, despite it being the top cause of poor health. Innovative new strategies can integrate nutrition and healthy eating for both treatment and prevention across federal healthcare programs. This will also help accelerate similar innovations among private payers. Produce prescriptions generally offer free or discounted specialty crop produce that patients can acquire from farmers markets and other sources, whereas medically tailored meals provide home delivered, nutritious meals tailored to patients with severe chronic conditions and limitations in activities of daily living. Such programs have documented significant improvements in health outcomes and healthcare utilization, often with net cost savings, and can also be a strong economic driver for local and regional food systems.

Improve food labels: the Food and Drug Administration (FDA) should establish a mandatory front-of-package labeling system that warns consumers about unhealthy foods. Front-of-package labeling—such as warning labels or stoplights that signal to consumers if the food product is too high in salt, added sugar, or saturated fat—can promote more equitable access to nutrition information, encourage companies to reformulate their products to be healthier, and encourage healthier diets. It is the centerpiece of legislation that I strongly support, the Food Labeling Modernization Act (S.2594/ H.R.4917). The FDA should also require online food retailers to provide consumers with the same nutrition, ingredient, and allergen information as required on food packages, another key component of the bill.

Address unhealthy ultra-processed foods: the FDA should establish mandatory reduction targets for industry for harmful additives such as excessive sodium and added sweeteners including sugars in our food supply to bring consumption down to safe levels consistent with the *Dietary Guidelines for Americans*. The majority of sodium and added sugar intake in our diet come from ultra-processed foods. Very little progress will be made to improve our diet and reduce diet-related disease if ultra-processed foods go unchecked. In that vein, the FDA released short-term 2.5-year voluntary sodium reduction targets for industry—which if achieved would bring down sodium in the food supply by 10 percent—but failed to make these targets mandatory and did not release the previously proposed 10-year targets that would rein in sodium to safer levels. The FDA has not developed either voluntary or mandatory added sugar reduction targets for the food and beverage industry. In order to substantially reduce diet-related disease, the FDA should require mandatory reductions of excessive sodium and added sweeteners including sugars.

Ensure healthy food is available on federal property: President Biden should issue an Executive Order to require use of the *Food Service Guidelines for Federal Facilities (FSG)* for food and beverages sold and served at federally owned and operated facilities. Millions of people rely on federal food service operations, including federal employees, veterans in Veterans Affairs hospitals, members of the armed services, and people who are incarcerated in federal prisons. The FSG are CDC-developed, evidence-based, voluntary best practices to align food service in federal facilities with the *Dietary Guidelines for Americans*. An executive order requiring the use of the FSG would change our government purchasing to improve health and reduce long-term healthcare costs. Procurement consistent with the FSG would also support healthy food purchases from independent family farmers and help address climate change. In addition, all federal agencies should make a vegetarian entrée available everywhere that federal government cafeterias are serving meals. Plant-based meals have dramatic health benefits, lowering the risk of diet related diseases such as diabetes, cancer and heart disease.

Sincerely,



Cory A. Booker
United States Senator

CC: Secretary Xavier Becerra, Department of Health and Human Services